

# THE PURUṢASŪKTA: ITS RELATION TO THE CASTE SYSTEM

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As is well-known, in the *Puruṣasūkta*, a reference is made to four orders of society as emanating from the sacrifice of the Primeval Being. The names of those orders are given there as *Brāhmaṇa*, *Rājanya*, *Vaiśya*, and *Śūdra*, who are said to have come respectively from the mouth, the arms, the thighs, and the feet of the *Puruṣa* <sup>1</sup>).

On the basis of this reference to the “four orders of society” in the *Puruṣasūkta* it has been argued that:

The fact that the four classes are described as of divine origin, although in a later hymn, must be taken as sufficient indication that they were of long duration and very well-defined, even though the exact demarcation of their functions, the regulations regarding their inter-relations, and the extent of their flexibility may not be referred to in the main body of *Rigvedic* literature which is avowedly of a liturgical nature <sup>2</sup>

Thus, the *Puruṣasūkta* has been cited to “prove that the formulation of castes, if not the Caste System, was already a *fait accompli* in the age of the *Rig Veda*” <sup>3</sup>).

This paper is an effort to examine this relationship of the *Puruṣasūkta* with the Caste System.

## II

Before this relationship can be fully examined, however, both the *Puruṣasūkta* and the notion of caste need to be carefully examined.

First the *Puruṣasūkta*. If the concerned verse of the *ṚgVeda* is

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1) *ṚgVeda* X.90.12.

2) G. S. Ghurye, *Caste, Class and Occupation* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1969) p. 45.

3) R. C. Majumdar, ed., *The Vedic Age* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1965) p. 403, fn. 1.

closely examined it discloses several striking features onomastically; (1) it is only in the Puruṣasūkta that *all* the four orders are mentioned; (2) the Śūdra is mentioned for the first and only time in the Puruṣasūkta in the ṚgVeda; (3) the word Rājanya is also mentioned once only in the ṚgVeda, in the Purusa-sukta (but its equation with the word *kṣatriya* is freely accepted); (4) not only do *rājanya* and *śūdra* occur only in the Puruṣasūkta, the word Vaiśya is also only found therein.

It may also be added that chronologically the Puruṣasūkta is a "late hymn" <sup>4)</sup> as it belongs to the tenth *maṇḍala*. Etiologically, three aspects of the hymn arouse interest: (1) while it refers to the *brāhmaṇa*, the *rājanya* and the *vaiśya* not as sprung from, but as identical with the mouth, the arms and the thighs of the Puruṣa, it refers to the *śūdra* as sprung from the feet <sup>5)</sup>; (2) the creator-god is not referred to as *prajāpati* or *brahmā* but as *puruṣa* <sup>6)</sup>; and (3) this hymn is only one of the several cosmogonic hymns found in the tenth *maṇḍala* of the ṚgVeda (see X.121, X.82, X.129 etc.). Finally, ascriptionally, the hymn is associated with the name of the sage Nārāyaṇa. Benimadhab Barua has argued that Nārāyaṇa's social theory is an adjunct to his cosmological speculation, and that he does not "seem to have taken the least trouble to enquire whether the distinction of four classes was based originally on a mere division of labour or otherwise" <sup>7)</sup>. Nevertheless, on the basis of this contrived juxtaposition, Barua maintains, "the Puruṣasūkta may be rightly considered as the first theocratic basis of the Cāturvarṇya system of the Brāhmaṇas" <sup>8)</sup>. One should note here that *varṇa* does not appear in the Puruṣasūkta at all. The word *varṇa* appears in the ṚgVeda and the words *brāhmaṇa*, *rājanya*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya* and *śūdra* appear in the ṚgVeda, but the word *varṇa* is never applied to them.

4) Louis Renou, *Vedic India* (Calcutta: Susil Gupta (India) Private Limited, 1957) p. 6.

5) R. C. Majumdar, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 388.

6) The popular creator-god of Hinduism, Brahmā, is not even named in the ṚgVeda. See Sukumari Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogeny* (Cambridge University Press, 1970) p. 317.

7) Benimadhab Barua, *A History of Pre-Buddhist Indian Philosophy* (University of Calcutta, 1921) p. 33.

8) *Ibid.*

Next, the term caste may be examined. The term, deriving from Portuguese 'casta' has been used rather loosely to cover the terms *jāti* as well as *varṇa* which are often distinguished in the Hindu legal tradition, though a tendency to occasionally confuse the two is apparent<sup>9</sup>). Hence in order to examine the relationship of the Puruṣasūkta to the caste-system, its relation to both *jāti* and *varṇa* must be examined.

### III

Let the relationship of the Puruṣasūkta to *jāti* be examined first. Before this can be done, however, some clarifications are called for. Firstly, there are two accounts of the origin of the *jātis*, the traditional Indian and the modern Western. The traditional account of the Smṛtis portrays the castes of India as having evolved from the four *varṇas* by a process of intermarriage and subdivision<sup>10</sup>). Modern Western scholarship, on the other hand, is not quite certain as to how *jāti* arose<sup>11</sup>) but discounts the traditional view<sup>12</sup>). Secondly, it seems that *jāti* has undergone various phases of development so that "Indologists will eventually have to readjust their view of Indian society"<sup>13</sup>).

It is clear that it is hard to establish a relationship between the Puruṣasūkta and the *jāti* aspect of the Caste System. Even on the traditional view of the origin of *jāti*, it is only through the association of the Puruṣasūkta with *varṇa* that it can be brought in relation to

9) It has been maintained that "The compiler of the *Institutes of Manu* was well-aware of the distinction between *varṇa* and *jāti* . . . . The two terms are carelessly confused in one passage (X.31) but in that only" (Percival Spear, ed., *The Oxford History of India* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958] pp. 63-64). But see Manu III.15, VIII.177, IX.86.335 and X.41 for similar confusion. Similarly, it has been maintained that "All ancient Indian sources make a sharp distinction between the two terms" *varṇa* and *jāti* (see A. L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India* [New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1967] p. 149). This too may be an overstatement, see Nirukta XII.13; Pāṇini V.4.9 etc.

10) See *Manusmṛti*, Chapter IX.

11) See P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra* Vol. V (Part II) (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1962) p. 1633.

12) D. F. Pocock, tr., *Essays on the Caste System by Célestin Bouglé* (Cambridge University Press, 1971) p. 26.

13) M. N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays* (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1962) p. 140.

*jāti*. Moreover, inasmuch as endogamy and commensality are aspects of *jāti* in later times and “prohibition of interdining and intermarriage” is not “even remotely hinted at in the hymns of the Ṛgveda”, it is even harder to bring the Puruṣasūkta in relation to *jāti* <sup>14</sup>).

#### IV

When one turns to the *varṇa* aspect of the Caste System, however, the situation changes, and the Puruṣasūkta becomes relevant. As has already been noted, “many regard this hymn of the Ṛgveda as the earliest exposition of the later Brahmanical view, and regard the essential features of the Caste System as existing even in the earliest Aryan society in India” <sup>15</sup>).

This view has some basis in fact <sup>16</sup>) but the kind of association it visualizes between the Puruṣasūkta and the Caste System raises some problems. As a matter of fact, it seems to raise three kinds of problem—hermeneutical, historical and mythical. And they are, to a certain extent, interconnected.

#### V

First, the hermeneutical problem. The problem is that the relevant verse of the Puruṣasūkta (verse 12) is capable of two contradictory interpretations—one hierarchical, the other organic. The hierarchical interpretation involves the notion that the head is the “most excellent” limb (*uttamāṅga*) <sup>17</sup>)—that the arms, thighs and feet are progressively less so in that order. Thus the Brāhmaṇa, also called *vaktraja* <sup>18</sup>), is

14) R. C. Majumdar, ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 391-392.

15) *Ibid.*, p. 388. The expression Caste System is best understood here, it seems, in terms of *varṇa* rather than *jāti*.

16) The ideas of the Puruṣasūkta are repeated in *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* V.I.6-10; *Vājasaneyī Samhitā* XXXI.11; *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* III.12. 5-6; *Mahābhārata* XII. 73.4-8; *Vāyu Purāṇa* i.VIII.155-9; *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* Ch. 49; *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* i. Ch. VI; *Vaśiṣṭha Dharma Sūtra* IV.2; *Baudhāyana Dharma Sūtra* I.10.19.5-6; *Āpastamba Dharma Sūtra* I.1.1.7; *Manu Smṛti* I.31 and *Yajñavalkya Smṛti* III.126, etc.

17) See Vaman Shivram Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1965) p. 260.

18) *Ibid.*, p. 823. “The Brahmins are declared to be chief because they are created from the mouth, punning on the word “mukha” (“mouth” and “chief”)” in the *Taittirīya Samhitā*, vide G. S. Ghurye, *op. cit.*, p. 44.



superior to all the other *varṇas* and surely to the Śūdra, who is called *pādaja* <sup>19</sup>). This interpretation is the favoured one in Smṛti literature. The organic interpretation is more modern and may be called neo-Hindu. This interpretation regards the various classes as forming part of one body-politic, just as the limbs are parts of the body. The emphasis now shifts from the fact that some limbs may be regarded as superior to others and rests on the fact that all limbs are parts of the body and that each has an important role to play and is important in its own way. The important point now is not that the four *varṇas* were created *mukhabāhūrupādāt* (*Manu Smṛti* I.31) but that they must function as parts of one body <sup>20</sup>)—*mukhabāhūrupādavat*. “The head cannot claim superiority over the feet simply because it trails in the air while the latter treads the dust: the feet are as essential to the body as the head. It is the principle of integration and co-ordination that weighed with the builders of caste” <sup>21</sup>).

A related aspect is the question as to whether the Caste System is based on birth or worth; on *janma* or *karma*. The uncertain position of the Puruṣasūkta in this respect can be seen from the fact that Śaṅkara quotes from this Sūkta in commenting on *Bhagavad-Gītā* IV.13, which mentions *guṇa* and *karma* and not *janma* as the determinants of *varṇa* <sup>22</sup>). Two points, however, need to be borne in mind when it is argued that “as the Śūdras were supposed to have been born from the feet of the first man, it could justify their servile position in brahmanical society” <sup>23</sup>). The first is that, although the statement sounds defamatory for the Śūdras, it *may* have had a *sociologically* positive role to play vis-a-vis their integration into the Aryan fold. “Either it shows that the Śūdras were supposed to belong to the same stock and hence were a

19) Vaman Shivram Apte, *op. cit.*, p. 610. “The statement that God created the Sudra to be the slave of all is repeated and he is given the name ‘pajada’”, G. S. Ghurye, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

20) Cf. I Corinthians: 14-26.

21) T. M. P. Mahadevan, *Outlines of Hinduism* (Bombay: Chetana Ltd., 1956) p. 70.

22) See *Śrīśaṅkaragrāṇthāvalī* Samputa 8 (Śrīraṅgam: Śrīvāṇīvilāsamudrāyan-trālayaḥ), p. 102.

23) Ram Sharan Sharma, *Śūdras in Ancient India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1958) p. 29.

section of the Aryan community, or it represents an attempt to find a common mythical origin for the heterogeneous brahmanical society" <sup>24</sup>). Secondly, the theological role of being a *pādaja* is not necessarily negative either. This follows from *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* III.6.33. "The *Bhāgavata* says, in fact, that when the four classes were created there was brought forth from the feet of Bhagavān 'service for the fulfilment of *dharma*, for which in former time was born the Śūdra by whose conduct Hari is pleased' " <sup>25</sup>). The sacred Ganges, after all, also flows from the feet of Bhagavān Viṣṇu and it is the Guru's feet which the disciple touches. What the reference can really be taken to represent is that "Just as the feet of the Puruṣa are his base, so the Śūdras, the servile class, are the base of society, and the earth is the base of the cosmos" <sup>26</sup>). The characterization of the Śūdras as "the servile class" is historical rather than theological.

Now the question arises—which of these two orientations underlie the Puruṣasūkta—the hierarchical or the organic one? And on what is *varṇa* based: *karma* or *janma*?

## VI

The attempt to answer this question leads into the historical problem. For the answer to the above question must, in part, depend on the historical facts about the Caste System. If it was still in a fluid and formative state in the Ṛg-Vedic period, when a Ṛg-Vedic seer could sing "A bard am I, my father a leech, and my mother is a grinder of corn" <sup>27</sup>), then the organic and egalitarian rather than the hierarchical interpretation would seem to accord better with facts <sup>28</sup>). If, however,

<sup>24</sup>) *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>25</sup>) Thomas J. Hopkins, "The Social Teaching of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*", in Milton Singer, ed., *Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966) p. 17.

<sup>26</sup>) Thomas J. Hopkins, *The Hindu Religious Tradition* (Belmont: California: Dickenson Publishing Co. Inc., 1971) p. 24.

<sup>27</sup>) See R. C. Majumdar, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 350.

<sup>28</sup>) "On the whole it is difficult not to agree with the views propounded long ago by Muir, that the Brāhmaṇas (far less the Kshatriyas or Vaiśyas) did not constitute an exclusive caste or race . . . . The heredity of occupation was, therefore, not yet a recognised principle, far less an established fact" (R. C. Majumdar, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 391).

the Caste System had *already* crystallised <sup>29)</sup> then the hierarchical interpretation would make more sense.

No definite answer to the question seems possible and the "extent to which caste had developed in the age of the *Ṛigveda Samhitā*" remains "a subject of keen controversy among scholars" <sup>30)</sup>.

Hence the answer to the question: which of the two orientations—the hierarchical and the egalitarian or organic—underlie the *Puruṣasūkta* may also have to be sought exegetically. In this context it is important to point out that the *order* in which the four '*varṇas*' have been mentioned—Brāhmaṇa, Rājanya, Vaiśya and Śūdra in the *Puruṣasūkta*—is the hierarchical order which is mentioned in subsequent Brahmanical literature and hence the order of enumeration has been regarded as very significant and indicative, at least potentially, of the hierarchical scheme of *varṇas* of later times. This argument, however, has its limitations, which may be highlighted thus:

At one place the *Sūkta* says that the *Puruṣa*'s mouth became the Brāhmaṇa and at another point we read that Indra and Agni sprang from his mouth. In the one case the mouth is mentioned first; but in the other instance the mouth is mentioned third, the first place being given to the mind and the second to the eye.

According to this latter arrangement, then, the moon that springs from the mind is perhaps superior to the sun that springs from the item mentioned next, namely the eye. And therefore, Indra and Agni are inferior to the Moon and the Sun.

Further, the *Sūkta* mentions the mouth twice but in two different positions. Similarly the feet are mentioned twice, and this again in two different orders. In the first instance the feet occupy the fourth place and the Śūdra is supposed to have sprung from them. In the second instance the feet have the seventh place and from there arose the earth. In the first instance the feet are the last to mention but in the second instance the feet have "precedence" before the ear which is eighth in order . . .

If the authors of the *Puruṣa-sūkta* are to be credited with a certain amount of coherent thinking, logical order or sense of system we shall have to understand them as having propounded a "dogma of precedence" or "preeminence"

29) "It seems certain that in the *Ṛig Veda* this Brāhmaṇa or Brahmin is already a separate caste, differing from warrior and agricultural castes" (A. A. Macdonell and A. B. Keith, *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*, Vol. II [London: John Murray, 1912] p. 81).

30) R. C. Majumdar, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 388. For a presentation of both sides of the question, see *ibid.*, pp. 387-391.

in which the navel (and correspondingly, the air), is superior to the head (and correspondingly, the sky), the head (sky) as superior to the feet (earth) and the feet (earth) as superior to the ear (four quarters).

Unless the navel be conceded to be superior to the head and the feet superior to the ear—simply because the authors have cared to mention these items in their order—the Brāhmaṇa cannot be superior to the Rājanya and the Vaiśya to the Śūdra.

No value can, therefore, be reasonably attached to the order in which the Brāhmaṇa, Rājanya etc. are mentioned <sup>31</sup>).

Although it is difficult to agree with the author's conclusion that *no* significance can be attached to the order, it is clear that excessive reliance cannot be placed upon it <sup>32</sup>).

The question whether *varṇa* was based on *karma* or *janma* may also be exegetically examined so far as the Puruṣasūkta is concerned. It should be carefully noted that the Puruṣasūkta does not so much speak of the *creation* of the four *varṇas* by a creator-god as the *transformation* of the *puruṣa* into the four *varṇas* by an act of ritual sacrifice, one of the words for which in later literature is *karma*. Thus it is as feasible to argue that the four classes are a *karmic* transformation of the *puruṣa* as to genetically locate them in Him, as later tradition seems to have done. The significance of this aspect of the situation is highlighted when the Puruṣasūkta is compared with Bhagavadgītā IV.13 wherein Kṛṣṇa clearly states: *cāturvarṇyam mayā sṛṣṭam!* There is a clear statement to the effect that "the fourfold order was created by Me". As against this, Puruṣasūkta speaks of the emergence of the four orders from various parts of the *puruṣa*—rather by an emanation or a transformation than a creation. What is more, in the Bhagavadgītā, where the *creation* of *varṇas* is indeed spoken of, the *varṇas* are *nowhere associated with birth*.

## VII

Now the third problem which relates to myths. The Puruṣasūkta is a creation-myth in two senses—it treats of the creation of the cosmos and the creation of caste <sup>33</sup>). But is it the only myth we have on these matters?

31) Benoy Kumar Sarkar in the *Indian Historical Quarterly*, Dec. 1926, pp. 858-859.

32) See, for instance, Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa I.2.1.8; etc.

33) It may be asked at this point whether the cosmic aspect is primary or the casteist, or whether both are equally important.



It may be one of the main ones but is not the only one which pertains to these points. Let us look at the Samhitās first. The *Vājasaneyī Samhitā* (XIV.28) of the *Śukla Yajur Veda* sponsors two theories: (1) a reproduction of the *Puruṣasūkta* with six additional verses and (2) a different version of creation in which the *Śūdras* and *Āryas* are created simultaneously, with day and night as their rulers. So much for the White Yajur Veda. The *Taittirīya Samhitā* of the *Kṛṣṇa Yajur Veda* offers five explanations. One of them is the same as that of the *Vājasaneyī Samhitā* and three do not bear on the issue on hand directly. The explanation relevant here (VII.1.1.4) tells us how from the feet of *Prajāpati* were created the *Anuṣṭubh* metre, *Vairāja Sāman*, the *Śūdra*, and the horse. It is argued that both the horse and the *śūdra* subsist by their feet, for they were created therefrom. In the *Atharva Veda* there are several explanations one of which one repeats the *Puruṣasūkta* and the others do not relate directly to the issue on hand.

Next the *Brāhmaṇas*. The *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* offers two explanations relevant here: (1) that the *Śūdras* sprang from the *Asuras* (i.2.6.7) and (2) that the *Śūdras* sprang from *Asat* or non-existence (iii.2.3.9). To these the *Śatapatha* adds (VIII.4.3.12) the association of the *Śūdra* with night<sup>34</sup>). All of these explanations conflict with the explanation offered in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* which declares the divinity of all the *varṇas* (I.4.15) and associates the *śūdra* with the god *Pūṣan*, as it associates other *varṇas* with other divinities (I.4.10-14).

What then is the overall picture? The origin of the four *varṇas* is variously explained. The same source sometimes differs in its explanations. When the theory is the same, the details vary. Often the theory varies.

Thus it is not easy to pin the Caste System on the *Puruṣasūkta* very firmly. Had it been the *only* theory of creation and the *only* theory of the creation of caste we would be on firmer ground. But this is not so. Take again the case of the *Śūdra*. The *Śūdra* is "said in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* to have been produced from the feet of *Brahmā* but in another

34) The compound, however, is not without its problems as ordinarily *śūdra* and *ārya* are compared with *day* and *night*.

part of the same work the distinctions are ascribed to voluntary election, to accident, or to positive institutions”<sup>35</sup>). Thus even in Smṛti literature the Puruṣa Sūkta is not the *sole* explanation offered for the Caste System. It may be argued that in spite of all the variations of the theme cited above, “the most common story is that the castes issued from the mouth, arms, thighs and feet of the Purusha or Brahmā”. But as J. Muir observes, “The oldest extant passage . . . is to be found in the Purusha Sūkta: but it is doubtful whether, in the form in which it is there represented, this representation is anything more than an allegory. In some of the texts of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa traces of the same allegorical character may be perceived; but in Manu and the Purāṇas the mystical import of the Vedic text disappears and the figurative narration is hardened into a literal fact”<sup>36</sup>).

### VIII

It is clear, therefore, that in face of the hermeneutical possibilities, the historical ambiguities (and perhaps the exegetical difficulties) associated with the Puruṣasūkta; and in view of the fact that the Puruṣasūkta is not the sole explanation essayed within the Hindu tradition of the Caste System (even though it is one of the earliest), the relation of the Puruṣasūkta to the Caste System is perhaps much more tenuous than has sometimes been assumed.

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35) John Garrett, *A Classical Dictionary of India* (Delhi: Oriental Publishers), p. 610.

36) *Original Sanskrit Texts*, Vol. 1 (London: Trubner & Co., 1871) p. 159.